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### The emotional geographies of belonging

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## **Title page**

**Title:** The Emotional Geographies of Belonging: Children's Intersectional Identities in Primary School

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# **The Emotional Geographies of Belonging: Children's Intersectional Identities in Primary School**

## **Abstract:**

This article examines the role of emotions for young children's social identities of ethnicity, race, nationality, class, gender, and culture in the context of a Scottish primary school. It argues that emotions contribute to how intersectional identities are performed in children's peer relationships within the discourses available to them, and that analyzing emotions is crucial for understanding how children's intersectional belongings come to be constructed and politicized. This makes emotions a highly political matter, important for understanding the complexity of intersectionality and for informing childhood policy and practice.

## **Keywords:**

Children's emotional geographies, intersectionality, identities and belonging, ethnicity/race, gender, social class

## **Introduction**

When discussing questions about childhood identities, inequalities and intersectionality – as is the focus of this special issue – it may be tempting to disregard emotions as (literally) 'immaterial' and therefore of negligible importance in trying to understand these issues. However, in this article I suggest that paying attention to emotions adds crucial insights to these debates, and their political and practical implications.

The central aim of this article is an examination of the role of emotions for children's social identities of ethnicity, race, nationality, class, gender, and culture in the context of a Scottish primary school. I argue that emotions contribute to how intersectional identities are

performed in the children's peer relationships, and that analyzing emotions is crucial for understanding how children's intersectional belongings come to be politicized. In opening up this discussion, the article contributes to the field of children's geographies by analyzing the importance of emotions for politicized social identities, and emphasizing the need for an intersectional lens in order to understand the complex links between identities, power and spaces of belonging. Following Davis (2008, 67), I view intersectionality as 'the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination'. In this article I operationalize the concept of intersectionality in order to draw attention to the dynamics of power involved in the various interacting and sometimes contradicting facets of the children's identities and belonging, and how these come to be performed and politicized.

In what follows, I begin by setting out the important contributions of the field of children's emotional geographies for understanding children's social identities. I then situate this paper conceptually within the literature on emotions, identities and belonging, and articulate its intersectional lens, before explaining the research context and some methodological considerations of researching emotions. In the following findings sections, I develop the article's aim by analyzing the children's emotional performances of identities and belonging in their everyday lives at school, before turning to a discussion of these findings and their policy and practice implications.

### **The emotional geographies of children's social identities**

The growing field of research on children's social identities has employed various theoretical lenses (Kustatscher et al 2016). In recent years, the emerging field of children's emotional geographies has added significantly to this literature by directing critical attention to the importance of emotions in the lives of children and young people (Blazek and Windram-Geddes 2013; Hackett, Procter, and Seymour 2015; Blazek and Kraftl 2015).

An expanding body of research has begun to explore the role of emotions for children's social identities by investigating emotional aspects of race and ethnicity (Zembylas 2011), gender (Gordon 2006), and there is a growing body of literature on class-based identities and material cultures (e.g. Ridge 2002; Lareau 2003; Reay 2005; 2006; Tudge 2008; Ahn 2010; Evans and Holt 2011; Holt, Bowlby, and Lea 2013). Children's emotional geographers have highlighted the complexity of multiple identities by exploring, for example, migrant children's feelings of belonging in advantaged or disadvantaged neighbourhoods (den Besten 2010), young people's gendered, classed and raced experiences of citizenship and participation in particular locations (Wood 2013), or the gendered and raced emotions involved in girls' identities and relationships in schools (Haavind et al. 2014).

Primary schools have received increasing attention in terms of their emotional geographies, and have been described as distinctive emotional terrains in which the display of emotions is often strongly regulated, including the control of children's bodies (Hemming 2007; Harden 2012). In Scottish education, emotions have entered the gaze of policy makers and practitioners through an emphasis on fostering children's 'emotional health' (Harden 2012), and 'emotional learning' or 'emotional literacy' have been stressed as important for children to develop 'positive relationships and positive behaviour' (Scottish Government 2010, no pagination). This reflects a particular conceptualisation of emotions as integrated into discourses of development and achievement shaped by neuroscientific and educational approaches (Kraftl 2013), as opposed to the conceptualisation of emotions as cultural and politicised practices that I draw on in this article.

### **Conceptualising emotions, identities and belonging: an intersectional lens**

While much work around emotions tends to view them as individual and inner states, in this article I draw on the work of Ahmed (2004a) and her conceptualisation of emotions as

cultural practices that contribute to how social identities, groups and collectivities are constructed:

... emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others. [...] In other words, emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects. (Ahmed 2004a, 10)

This means that ideas about what constitutes the 'I' and the 'you', or the 'us' and 'them', and their distinction, materialize through performances which are shaped by emotions. These performances must not be understood as willful, intentional or fully conscious 'acts' or choices, but rather as produced within the parameters of various discourses on the identities that are available to children in specific circumstances (Butler 1990).

The ways in which children perform their identities produce complex forms of belonging (or non-belonging) in their everyday lives at school. Children can 'belong' to individual persons or groups, in abstract or concrete ways, and through processes of self-identification or identification by others. Belonging tends to be naturalized and part of everyday practices. It is constituted by emotions, relationships and attachments, as well as by people's complex positionalities in terms of their gender, race, ethnicity, social class, age, sexuality etc.<sup>1</sup> (Yuval-Davis 2006b; 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the 'etc.', often added at the end of identity category lists, has been the subject of much debate in intersectionality theory. Butler (1990, 143) suggests that the 'embarrassed "etc."' constitutes a 'sign of exhaustion' and signifies the inevitable failure to fully encompass a situated subject. On the other hand, Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011) argues that the exact dimensions of the 'etc.' will be *filled in* according to the situated research context.

The concept of *intersectionality* is useful for understanding this complexity, and the power relations involved. Developed by Black Feminist thinkers (Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1991), intersectionality recognizes the differences among particular groups – e.g. women, or children – and, crucially, the implications of these differences in terms of power (Davis 2008, 70). There have been numerous debates about how to conceptualize the intersections between categories (e.g. as additive or constitutive), about *which* intersections matter (and how they are prioritised), the levels of intersectional analysis (individual identities or structural inequalities), and various methodological approaches (e.g. McCall 2005; Valentine 2007; Hancock 2007; Lutz, Vivar, and Supik 2011; Yuval-Davis 2011; Bilge 2013). Using an intersectional lens in the study of children’s identities and belongings draws attention to complexity and multiplicity, as well as to the dynamics of power and politics involved in their performances.

## **Research Background and Methodology**

This article draws on an ethnographic study in a Scottish primary school. The focus of the research was to explore how young children perform their social identities of social class, gender and ethnicity in their everyday lives at school (Kustatscher 2015). Ethical approval was gained from University of Edinburgh Moray House ethics committee and by the department of education services of the city council in which the study took place. Informed consent was sought from children, parents and educational staff and steps were taken to allow for the ongoing nature of consent and confidentiality (see Kustatscher 2014; 2015 for further discussion of the research, including ethical procedures and analysis).

The school, located in an urban area, was characterised by high diversity in terms of the children’s gender, race, ethnic and social class backgrounds. Over the course of a school year, I conducted fieldwork with children aged 5-7 in one class on an almost daily basis. Data were

generated by spending time with, observing and interacting with the children and producing fieldnotes, audio-recorded interviews, a research diary, as well as identifying relevant documents, texts and displays.

The fieldwork took place in various spaces of the school, such as the classroom, lunch hall, gym hall, playground, corridors, and occasionally places beyond the school (e.g. during trips). The display of emotions in primary schools tends to be strongly regulated (Harden 2012), resulting in a perceived ‘absence’ of emotions. An overt acknowledgement of emotions is also largely absent from educational research, philosophy and curricula (Kenway and Youdell 2011)<sup>2</sup>. Thus, while discussions about the absence or regulation of ‘appropriate’ emotions dominate theoretical debates, in practice children (and staff) live complex emotional lives in the spaces of primary schools. Most people who attended a school at one point in their lives can testify to intense emotional memories, and to the importance of such emotions in shaping educational experiences.

However, despite the expanding nature of emotional geographies research, challenges of researching emotions are far from resolved. Emotions are elusive and ‘difficult to approach’ (Blazek and Windram-Geddes 2013, 1), and writing about emotions raises complex questions about representational issues (Smith, Davidson et al. 2009), particularly about the role of the researcher<sup>3</sup>. Conducting a school ethnography is a profoundly emotional experience, both through reviving one’s own emotional memories (Thorne 1993), as well as through receiving intimate insights into emotions – often outwith the gaze of teachers – in interactions among and with children. During the fieldwork, children rarely *named* their emotions, and where

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<sup>2</sup> While the distinction between ‘rational’ and ‘emotional’ often underpins such debates in popular and academic discourses, from a poststructuralist perspective it does not stand up to scrutiny, since the very ‘absence’ of discernible emotions – in science often promoted through calls for ‘detachment’ or ‘objectivity’ – can be seen as an emotional state in itself (Bondi 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, such questions are not limited to the study of emotions, but are equally important in wider ontological and epistemological debates about representation.



emotions are named in the following analysis sections they tend to have been defined by myself as the researcher. These emotions have been identified through making reflexive use of my own emotional experiences (Procter 2013) and through an interpretation of children's speech acts, facial expressions and body languages. I have aimed to provide comprehensive fieldnote narratives of the research setting in my fieldnotes and hope that they provide the 'contextual richness' (Beatty 2010, 430) for readers to empathize with my interpretations, and to make their own.

## **Findings**

I begin each of the following three sections with a fieldnote excerpt in order to draw the reader into the contextualised emotional narratives. The first section illustrates how emotions shape the performance of complex and multiple identities and forms of belonging, and how they contribute to how identities come to be politicized and invested with notions of entitlement, status and power. In the second findings section, I show how reiterative performances of identities and belonging come to shape the children's standing within their social relationships beyond specific interactions. The third section, finally, contributes an understanding of the complexity and ambivalence of belongings which are in tension with dominant practices and discourses in school, and the challenging experiences this creates for some children.

### ***The Politics of Intersectional Belonging***

I sit at the drawing table in the classroom with Tahira<sup>4</sup>, Asya and Fatima. Whilst drawing, we are chatting.

**Tahira** shouts, happily: *'Marlies, today is my last day and then I go on holiday!'*

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<sup>4</sup> All participant names in this article are pseudonyms.

Next week, the spring break starts.

**I** say: *'Oh really, are you not coming in tomorrow?'* (There is still one day of school to go before the break.)

**Tahira** (very happy and excited): *'Nooo, I'm going to Pakistan!'*

Now **Fatima** shouts: *'I'm going to Pakistan too, I'm Pakistani!'*

She seems proud and happy. I noticed before that Fatima has a strong Pakistani identity and is always proud to stress it, whereas Tahira usually does not emphasize it.

Now **Asya** says: *'I'm going toooooo!'*

(The teacher told me that Asya is from Turkey. Asya herself has never mentioned the name of her country of origin).

**Fatima** says to Asya, sounding angry: *'No, you're not going!'*

**Asya**: *'Yes, I am going!'*

**Fatima** shouts at her, angrily: *'But you don't speak the language!'*

**I** ask Asya: *'Where are you going on holidays Asya?'*

**Asya**: *'I don't remember...'*

She mumbles something that I cannot understand.

**Tahira** turns to me and says: *'I have to speak Urdu in Pakistan but I like better Dubai 'cause I don't have to speak Urdu and we have a biiig swimming pool in Dubai. I was jumping in and out and I almost killed myself, Marlies! I was two times in Pakistan and two times in Dubai. I like Dubai better because of the big house and the big swimming pool!'*

**Fatima** says to Tahira: *'I am going to Pakistan.'*

Then the children are called to a different activity by the teacher, and the conversation is interrupted.

The above situation is an example of how belonging is performed in interactions between the children. In this case, the children's belonging is related to multiple and intersecting facets of their identities (countries, nationalities, language, and social class). These intersections are invested with emotions – happiness, anger, pride, excitement – which give meaning and value to particular forms of belonging.

The places mentioned in the conversation – Pakistan, Dubai – are physically remote from the context of the school, but nevertheless feature often and prominently in the children's conversations. For Fatima, going to Pakistan and speaking Urdu are both markers of her identity as 'being Pakistani', which she asserts strongly and confidently. It appears that she invests this form of belonging – to a nation and community – with pride and joy, and she seems angry when she perceives Asya as infringing the boundary which she has drawn around the category of 'being Pakistani'. Fatima foregrounds their different languages in order to exclude Asya from this particular form of belonging.

While Fatima highlights dimensions of ethnicity (being Pakistani, speaking 'the' language) in order to construct a collectivity that she belongs to, Tahira draws on multiple aspects of identity which make her belonging more complex and ambivalent. She emphasizes her upcoming holiday in Pakistan and seems to be looking forward to it. At the same time, she wants me to know about her connections to Dubai, and her emotional preference of the latter. She explains her more positive attachment to Dubai as due to material aspects, i.e. with her access to 'the big house and big swimming pool', as well as with 'not having to speak Urdu'. The latter statement resonates with other observations during my fieldwork, in which I noticed that Tahira did not like to disclose the fact that she speaks Urdu when confronted by other Urdu-speaking children. A reason for this could be that her Urdu is not very good, or that she may have a particular accent. Given the multiple meanings that 'being Urdu' can

have in relation to other dimensions of ethnicity (the children used the phrase ‘being/speaking Urdu’ alternately as a marker for nationality, religion, or cultural practices such as eating certain foods) she could also have other reasons for not wanting to be associated with ‘Urdu’. Tahira’s prioritization of her belonging to Dubai, at least in part due to the material resources it provides, could be interpreted as a class-differentiated attitude to space and place, as a place that she feels reflects her social identity and allows her to feel in control (Reay and Lucey 2000). It could also be interpreted as her awareness of and contribution to discourses of global power relations, performing her ‘wealthy’ connections to Dubai as preferable in relation to Pakistan.

Finally, Asya’s claim to go on holiday to Pakistan as well is challenged by Fatima, and this illustrates how forms of belonging not only depend on self-identification but also on identification by others (Yuval-Davis 2011). It remains unclear whether Asya is, in fact, going to Pakistan during the holidays. The conversation resonates with other fieldwork observations about Asya’s ‘uncertain’ ethnic belonging. For example, on other occasions staff and children repeatedly tried to find out what her native language is, but she was unable or unwilling to disclose it, resulting in some discontent in the classroom. It may be that ethnicity does not have a big significance for Asya, or that her ethnic background is too complex to be explained, particularly in English as an additional language (for example, if her family is indeed from Turkey as the teacher suspects, she could be part of a minority ethnic group within Turkey, or hold mixed ethnic heritage and speak multiple languages). Her claim to go on holiday, but being unsure where to, could also be interpreted as an attempt to perform a classed belonging (stressing that her family, too, are able to go on holiday) rather than belonging to an ethnic community. The fact that teachers and children are keen to establish a clear (and singular?) ethnic identity for Asya indicates the unsettling feelings that this *not knowing* creates for them. This highlights another type of challenge that minority

ethnic children may face when their complex identities do not fit easily into narratives of belonging within the school context.

Discussions like the above occurred frequently during my fieldwork, and illustrate the ongoing importance of emotions for the making of and belonging to particular groups. The emphasis on place resonates with literature from the field of children's geographies which stresses the importance of the socio-spatial (Vanderbeck and Dunkley 2004; Horton and Kraftl 2005). The children have extensive knowledges about local, national and global places which feature vividly in their everyday interactions. Their performances of belonging are not clear-cut and singular, but, as in Tahira's case, express multiple narratives of belonging simultaneously (Ludvig 2006) – belonging to Pakistan or Dubai, speaking different languages, and having access to different resources – which through emotions (performed both verbally and non-verbally) are given particular value and status. Their attachment to particular places is linked to wider geo-cultural discussions (e.g. making class-based distinctions of areas) and particularly shaped through family relationships (Scourfield et al. 2006).

The excerpt is an illustration of how the children engage in what Yuval-Davis (2011) terms the 'politics of belonging', by constructing certain forms of belonging as *homogeneous* (only Urdu-speaking people can claim to be Pakistani) and *exclusive* (since Asya does not speak Urdu, she cannot be part of the group of Pakistani people). Fatima draws a boundary around 'being Pakistani', and defines who stands inside and outside of this boundary, investing the belonging to this group with notions of entitlement, status and power. She hints at a discourse of *naturalised authenticity* (only who speaks the right language can make a 'real' claim to being Pakistani) (Yuval-Davis 2011), which resonates with some of the arguments used in current political debates about migration and nationality. Summing up, the above interaction shows how children engage in the politics of belonging, by performing hierarchies of groups

and identities, and recognising or challenging others' intersectional belongings to these groups. The following section shows how such emotional performances come to shape children's status and relationships beyond individual interactions.

### **Everyday belonging and non-belonging: the power of reiterative performances**

Some children in the class have coats of a certain (quite expensive) brand, which generally seems to be popular on the playground. Girls often point out to each other if they are both wearing one of these coats and show mutual appreciation.

In the class, Krystle, Eleanor, Tahira and Amy have the coat.

**Eleanor** got hers for her birthday a few weeks ago, and she was happily pointing out to everyone to be in partner look with her best friend **Krystle**.

**Tahira** had hers first and **Amy** just got it some days ago. **Carla**, who is often playing with Tahira and Amy, does not have one. She is wearing a rather tattered coat. Both Amy and Carla are entitled to free school meals.<sup>5</sup>

**Amy** is also wearing shiny patent leather shoes that are way too big so she has to walk very strangely in order not to lose them. She is unable to catch anyone at tag with these shoes, because they fall off when she runs, but she does not seem to mind too much.

When it is time to line up after the break, I happen to stand behind Amy.

I say: *'Amy, is that a new coat?'*

She throws me a long, meaningful look, and without saying a word points at the big brand logo at the front of the coat, on her chest. She looks very serious and I just nod. I have the feeling that she just wanted to point out to me that this was not just any new jacket, it was a branded one.

The excerpt illustrates another example of performing belonging, and gives some insights into the emotions involved in different facets of *how* to belong. In this case, the branded coats

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of fieldwork, children from families with a low income were entitled to 'free school meals'. Whilst this can therefore be used as an indicator for low income, the children in the class did not seem to be aware of it.

are constructed as highly desirable due to their material value in intersection with gendered ideas about ‘fashionableness’ and style. Thus, wearing the coats is used to stress the belonging to a classed *and* gendered insider group. For example, Krystle and Eleanor, who emphasise their ‘best friend’ relationship on an almost daily basis, use the symbolic meaning of the coats as yet an additional aspect over which they perform this bond.

The way in which the coats are invested with meanings highlights the emotions involved in the performance of gendered and classed identities that I observed throughout the fieldwork. In relation to gender, I often witnessed how important it was for children to perform their gender identities ‘correctly’, and to be positioned ‘correctly’ by others (Davies 2003). This regularly (but importantly, not always) resulted in quite stereotypical performances of masculinity and femininity. If children were seen as not conforming to hegemonic gender identities, they were often exposed to humiliation or ridicule (e.g. when one of the boys was ‘accused’ of liking the colour pink). Also in relation to class, emotions were crucial for the ways in which classed identities were performed (Reay 2005), as evident on many occasions. For example, in playground games in which children took on the roles of princesses and maids, the latter were often treated with such disgust and aggression that many children refused to assume the role of maid. Such emotions entailed in gendered and classed (and other) aspects of identities resulted in complex and sometimes ambivalent feelings of hurt, aversion, envy or shame surrounding the performing of intersectional belongings.

Bearing in mind these emotions involved in the performances of gender and class, the example of the coats gives insights into how different children are differently invested into forms of belonging, in this case at the intersection of gender and class. For some of the children, wearing the coats seemed to be endowed with carefree, happy emotions (for example, when laughingly pointing out “Look, I have the same!”) and used to establish

bonding and status. For others, like Amy, I sensed that the coats were a profoundly serious, non-joking matter. The significant value of the brand, which distinguishes the coat from any other jacket, is highlighted in Amy's silent pointing out of the brand logo. Her silence may be interpreted as a lack of words which could adequately convey the brand's meaning and value for her. The silent yet powerful interaction left me with a sense of Amy's deep respect and awe for the value of the brand. I had the impression that Amy – who comes from a low-income background – may be more conscious of the value of the jacket than other, more privileged children who may take it for granted. By just nodding knowingly I felt as if I was complicit in the construction of the coat's value. In addition, Amy complements her outfit with shiny patent leather shoes which, although limiting her physical movements, also earn her much recognition from some of the other girls. Despite repeatedly being told off by the teacher because of their impracticality (e.g. she has difficulties to keep up with the group when the class walks into town to see a play) and the fact that she is excluded from certain games which involve running (and exposed to moments of humiliation when she loses them in the middle of a game), Amy receives many positive comments about the shoes from her female peers.

The emotions entailed in such interactions have implications for the children's standing within their social relationships in class. On many occasions I have observed the intersections of class and gender – symbolised through brands, styles, fashion – to play an important role in the triad of Tahira, Carla and Amy. The three girls often play together, yet their relationship is characterised by subtle tensions. Tahira holds a powerful position in the triad (and this resonates with her confidence exhibited in the previous excerpt) and often pits Carla and Amy against each other. For example, in the weeks before Tahira's birthday party, she constantly scrutinises the other girls' behaviours and styles and implies that it will influence whether she will give them an invitation or not. In these situations, Amy bonds with Tahira



over their branded jackets and often points out her shiny shoes to her, and it seems that this indeed wins her Tahira's recognition. Amy and Carla, both entitled to free school meals, may face similar material restrictions in their access to material objects like clothes. However, Amy is complying with the 'right' gendered and classed styles – and makes sure this is noticed by other children – and this secures her a more favourable status within the triad. This illustrates that what is at stake is not just whether someone belongs or not in specific moments, but that the children's belonging to gendered, classed and other groups that is created through such reiterative performances (Butler 1990) comes to establish their identities beyond specific interactions, and thus the power dynamics involved in every single interaction shape their belonging and status in everyday life at school more generally. The final section shows how belonging can nevertheless be ambivalent, and is located against dominant practices and discourses in school.

### ***Ambivalent Belongings: Negotiating Different 'Worlds'***

Some days before Christmas, Raphael, Damien and Fatima sit around the drawing table and are chatting.

**Raphael** shouts: *'We have a Christmas tree!'*

**Damien** shouts: *'WE have a Christmas tree!'*

He laughs excitedly.

**Raphael**: *'Ours is this big!'* (He points about his own height.)

**Damien**: *'Ours is THIS big!'* (He points a little bit higher.)

**Fatima** says, sounding quite contently: *'We don't have a Christmas tree in our world.'*

...

Later that day, on the playground, **Fatima** comes up to me. She looks sad and says quietly: *'Marlies, I don't have a Christmas tree.'*

I say: *'That's ok Fatima. I don't have a Christmas tree either.'*

She seems relieved and walks away.

The excerpt is an example of how Fatima's social identity 'rubs up' against dominant cultural practices in school, and gives an insight into the many and multifaceted differences that children need to negotiate as part of their intersectional belongings:

When individual identities are 'done' differently in particular temporal moments they rub up against, and so expose, these dominant spatial orderings that define who is in place/out of place, who belongs and who does not. (Valentine 2007, 19)

Christmas is one of the main cultural events celebrated throughout the year in the school. Although teachers explain the religious background, most staff and children appear to celebrate Christmas as a secular event. In addition to cultural traditions, such as singing Christmas songs, opening Christmas calendars and making seasonal decorations, the event is infused with strong commercial elements in the form of presents, merchandising products, etc. Thus, celebrating Christmas happens at the intersections of religious, cultural, ethnic and socio-economic practices.

In the above situation, Raphael and Damien establish a sense of sameness over their families' celebration of Christmas. Raphael's parents are Chinese, and Damien's French, but ethnic differences are downplayed in this moment as they both stress their similar Christmas practices. They express their happiness and anticipation of the upcoming Christmas celebrations by talking excitedly about it and laughing. They also engage in a light-hearted form of competition over the height of their families' Christmas trees, participating in a

material contest, and in an interaction which could also be interpreted as a gendered performing of their masculinities in relation to power and potency.

Fatima, whose family does not celebrate Christmas, states that ‘they’ do not have a Christmas tree ‘in their world’. The ‘we’ and ‘our’ may refer to her family, or to a wider community, which may refer to her ethnic, cultural, religious, classed etc. background. The expression ‘world’ indicates the chasm that she experiences between her multiple forms of belongings. In my first fieldnote excerpt I note that she sounds ‘quite content’ when referring to not having a Christmas tree in ‘her world’, based on my perception as a researcher that she is happy to state this and does not appear bothered or upset. This could be interpreted as her being unconcerned about the fact that ‘her world’ differs, and valuing these different practices. Her ‘contentedness’ may also be a way of performing a sense of indifference in order to justify her different ‘world’. While in the classroom she seems content to state that she does not have a Christmas tree, in our later encounter on the playground I have a distinct feeling that she is now sad about this. It could be that my earlier interpretation was wrong, or that the fact that we are now not surrounded by other children allows her to give me insight into a different emotional experience, or indeed that other events have occurred during the day that caused her to feel more negatively about not having a Christmas tree. My spontaneous response is to comfort her through the fact that I, too, do not have a Christmas tree, following my own feeling that her being different from ‘the norm’ is what causes her to feel sad. (Although my response is an ambivalent one and not completely honest, since I am participating in cultural celebrations of Christmas even though I do not have a ‘tree’ – and I presume that Fatima is aware of this to some extent.) Indeed, she seems ‘relieved’ at my statement, and this points towards the fact that being similar, or having an ally in being different, makes it more bearable.

Not having a Christmas tree may equate to an exclusion on multiple intersecting levels: from the cultural mainstream in the school (and beyond), from religious or religiously coined majority practices, and from the strong commercial and socio-economic aspects of this event which lead to competitive dynamics among the children. Fatima's 'world' may refer to cultural, religious and economic practices simultaneously, and thus the conversation exposes the multiple facets of her belonging. Negotiating such different 'worlds' at the intersection of various aspects of identities creates ambivalent emotional experiences for the children. While belonging to particular groups is sometimes performed vocally and proudly – e.g. by Damien and Raphael above – belonging can also be expressed in more quiet, subtle ways – such as by Fatima. Often, this relates to whether a particular form of belonging fits in with the dominant practices in school, or whether it positions the children as 'other', yielding emotional experiences of longing, sadness, or loneliness. However, this is not a simple process: children may belong in terms of some aspects of their identities, but not in others. In the above example, Fatima's emotional investment into her belonging seems ambivalent, as she appears both content about belonging to a particular 'world' but at the same time upset about being excluded from another, highlighting the ambivalent emotions entailed in her intersectional belonging.

## **Discussion**

Drawing on the works of Ahmed (2004a) and Butler (1990) and their poststructuralist underpinnings, and the contributions of intersectionality theory (e.g. Yuval-Davis 2011) has allowed me to develop three main arguments in the findings sections.

*First*, emotions are crucial for shaping children's intersectional identities and forms of belonging, and contribute how these come to be politicised. Using an intersectional lens not only opens up a view of identities and belonging as multiple and complex, but crucially,

draws attention to the power dynamics involved in creating hierarchies, belongings and boundaries (Davis 2008). The analysis has showed that everyday interactions in children's lives are far from trivial, but steeped in relations of power. As feminist geographers have long highlighted, there are strong links between identities, places and power:

Places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial – they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience. (McDowell 1999, : 4)

This is evident in the ways in which the children use emotions to perform their belonging to various places and groups (countries, nationalities, language, and social class) which are ascribed different values and status, involving political decisions about who belongs, and who does not (Yuval-Davis 2011). By drawing boundaries and investing them with emotions, these very groups and places are brought into existence (Ahmed 2004a).

*Second*, the performative nature of emotions, identities and belonging means that performances in individual interactions come to shape children's status in their relationships at school beyond those interactions, more generally. Despite evoking places far beyond the geographical terrain of the primary school (e.g. Pakistan), such discussions have clear implications for who belongs, and who is excluded, from peer relationships in the here and now. The example of Amy's branded coat and shiny shoes gives insights into her performative belonging in a particular situation, which extends into her relationships in the class more generally. This highlights the links between discursive identities available to children and their emotional embodiment of these very identities. For intersectional perspectives, a poststructuralist understanding of identities as performative directs attention

towards the emotions, cultural and political practices which reiteratively construct dominant social hierarchies, privileges and disadvantages.

And *third*, ambivalent forms of belonging (or non-belonging) expose dominant practices and discourses in the school context, and the ways in which they are both challenged and maintained continuously by children and staff. The examples have highlighted the importance of performing identities ‘correctly’, and for identities to be recognised by others (Valentine and Sporton 2009; Yuval-Davis 2011). Such interactions are highly contextual, and gender, class, ethnicity, race, religion or age all played a part in the children’s intersectional belongings. In the above examples, the children performed different identities and groups based on dimensions of ethnicity, nationality, language or religion, and they did not use skin colour or other physical differences in order to establish forms of belonging. Indeed, other fieldwork observations showed that racialised physical differences appeared to be ‘tabooed’ as a marker of difference when talking about their own and their peers’ identities. However, when talking about fictional characters or wider communities, the children were clearly not ‘colour-blind’, but aware of differences in skin colour and their powerful social implications (see Kustatscher 2015).

In opening up these angles of analysis, the article contributes to the field of children’s geographies by illustrating the need for an intersectional lens in order to understand the complex links between identities, power and spaces of belonging. It also highlights the importance of emotions for politicized social identities: emotions play a significant role in determining which aspects of belonging are foregrounded or silenced, and which aspects come to be experienced as desirable and powerful, or as shameful and inferior. Analysing these emotions is crucial for understanding how such intersectional belongings come to be performed and politicized.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

As outlined at the beginning of this article, in Scotland (and the UK more widely) emotions have come to enter policy and practice debates predominantly through discourses of neuroscientific development and educational achievement (Kraftl 2013), e.g. through a focus on ‘emotional literacy’ or ‘emotional learning’. This often implies a relationship between ‘appropriate’ emotion regulation and questions of discipline and development, and does not necessarily acknowledge the political nature of emotions. However, the importance of emotions for children’s performances of intersectional identities and belongings, which I have suggested through my analysis, makes emotions a highly political matter.

The implication that arises from this is that policy makers and practitioners who work with children need to recognise the inherently political nature of emotions, and understand emotions as part of the workings of power and of the making and experiencing of identities and inequalities. This requires being sensitive and attending to emotions within educational settings, in order to understand children’s intersectional belongings and processes of in- and exclusion, and in order to make sure that all aspects of children’s identities are valued and not silenced.

This research took place during a time of rising anti-immigration and anti-Islamic *sentiments* in the UK, as well as in the context of heightened socio-economic inequalities in a climate of political austerity, and the children’s interactions need to be seen against this background. The debate between Fatima, Tahira and Asya about ‘going to Pakistan’ illustrates that questions about global power relations and migration do not cease at the school gates, but play an important part for how young children perform their intersecting identities and belongings in school. Similarly, Fatima’s perception of balancing ‘different worlds’ ties into social discourses about ‘diversity’ which are often marked by a language of ‘us’ and ‘them’,

and constructions of ‘the other’ (Ahmed 2004b; Yuval-Davis 2011). This places a responsibility on staff to create spaces for discussing, and challenging, the ‘politics of belonging’ (Yuval-Davis 2011) – who belongs, who is excluded, how groups and identities come to be constructed, and the power relations of how, and by whom, this is decided.

The symbolic meanings of the ‘branded coats’ and ‘shiny shoes’ illustrate the ongoing importance of objects like clothes and accessories. There are countless examples of such classed, racialised and gendered objects in the school context – branded clothing, Star Wars lunch boxes, Hello Kitty bags, children’s jewellery, etc. It is difficult for practitioners to challenge their meanings, given that schools themselves are situated within a society that is so strongly shaped by materialist, gendered and racialised discourses. Yet examples such as Amy’s and Carla’s show the importance of practitioners being aware of subtle aspects of objects and appearances and problematizing their potential for creating exclusionary dynamics among children.

These implications resonate with calls for policy makers and practitioners to recognise the contextual and intersecting aspects of social justice (Cribb and Gewirtz 2003; Konstantoni 2011; Kustatscher 2015), and to be aware of how these are constituted by, and at the same time produce, profound emotional experiences.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have explored the emotions that contribute to children’s intersectional identities and belongings within a primary school context. I have suggested that using an intersectional lens whilst doing so draws attention to the various simultaneous, interacting and sometimes contradicting facets of the children’s belonging, and how these come to be performed and politicized.



The emotional geographies of the primary school extend to spaces and places beyond the actual setting: schools do not exist in isolation, and children's (and staff's) relationships within them are both shaped by, and contribute to, wider social relations in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, class, etc. Emotions are significant for delineating and interweaving the personal and the social, and help to understand the subtle aspects and dynamics of belonging and being excluded on both an individual and structural level. This means that emotions, which contribute to how we see ourselves and others, are crucial for understanding the complexity of intersectionality, and for informing childhood policy and practice.

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